

"I'm sorry if you can't tell if I'm making fun of Carl Andre or not. He would have wanted it this way. -Patrica Taxxon, The Kunst Saga | How the Right Wing Views Modern Art-

There was something surreal about Alanna's life.

Okay, that was unfair. There were a lot of surreal things in her life, but most of them were becoming increasingly common, and more understandable. Dungeons were challenging, but not instantly lethal. Magic items had their own sets of weird quirks and logic. Teleporting everywhere was just how life was now. Her boyfriend had seven boyfriends. *Normal* stuff.

Alanna had never really been someone who got afraid that often. She was afraid for other people; especially her sisters when she had to leave them at home with her mother. Especially James or Anesh, when they went delving. But never herself.

She wasn't afraid to get in fights, or get her hands dirty, or talk to people, or just live the way she wanted. James called her an emotional bulldozer sometimes, and she thought that was funny, but Alanna *did* feel things. She just loved the experience of being kinda nervous and doing something anyway. Of crushing her own fear and plowing forward.

The dungeons making her stronger and stronger over time had just amplified that. She wanted to delve deeper, and out in the mundane world she wanted to fling her newfound abilities into whatever systems she could. Knowing that she wasn't invincible didn't stop Alanna from feeling like she could take on the world.

Which was why it was weird that she was a fidgeting and anxious mess, sitting in a brightly lit, cold, and kinda dirty cafe in the weird part of Bonney Lake, Washington.

Okay, that wasn't fair. Alanna hadn't been to this city before; *any* part could be the weird part. But this part wasn't doing a great job of making her feel comfortable. The whole area seemed like one of those all-devouring upper middle class suburbs, which made it actively strange that the cafe sucked. Maybe it was because the only people who would work here were demotivated kids who were trapped here.

Mentally complaining about the cafe bought her a little time not worrying about what she was actually here for. And it was just enough time for the person she was waiting for to arrive.

Two women walked in, the bell over the slightly stuck door making more of a clatter than a jingle. One of them was someone Alanna had worked with for a while; mainly she was a case manager for Recovery, but she tagged into Response activities when they needed someone who had experience as a counselor. A few orbs here and there added up to someone who was exceptionally good with her words, and had a deep loyalty to the people who had saved her life.

The younger woman she was bringing in was, by Alanna's count, barely eighteen. She was still taller than the Recovery agent, though with a lanky frame and an awkward way of moving like she would never get used to how she'd grown. Dark blonde hair, eyes that were also the same color as Alanna's, she was wearing a thick purple hoodie with her hands pulled up into the sleeves.

Alanna practically felt her heart stop as the older woman pointed out her table, and then patted the teen on the back while she went to get a biscotti. Briefly, she wondered if doing this alone had been the right call. All of her partners had offered to come, and so had half her friends or Response teammates. But Alanna had still come alone, feeling like it was meaningful somehow. Now she was just panicking.

The girl looked almost as nervous as Alanna felt, but she still walked over, standing by the table like she wasn't sure if she was in the right place. "Uh... hi?" She ventured.

"Hey Erin." Alanna's voice cracked as she greeted her sister. "How's it going?"

The girl practically crumbled at Alanna's words. "You *do* know me." She said, trembling.

Some part of Alanna's brain, the part that stored her sarcasm and snark alongside her unwillingness to let nervousness stop her, kicked in. "Well, okay, to be fair, Cathy could have just told me." She pointed over at the woman who had led Erin in. Her sister's face dropped into a kicked puppy look that instantly had Alanna regretting saying anything. "But also that didn't happen. Yeah, I know you. Do you wanna..." She gestured to the empty chair on the other side of the small table.

Erin scrambled to sit, setting her hands on the lacquered surface of the table, leg tapping wildly. "I... can I ask something?" She started nervously.

"Oh, please, go for it." Alanna felt a wave of relief. "I have no idea how to do this, so just... hit me. What's up?"

"Are... you *do* know me, right?" Alanna nodded in response and the girl continued. "*Were* you my sister? Did you live with us? Or... or... are you my *actual* mom? I just... I..." Erin trailed off.

Alanna held up a hand, then brought it around to her mouth to cover the gawking look she was sporting. "Okay," she said, trying not to laugh, "I'm really sorry, but *ow*, no, I am not your secret mom. Do I look that old? Wait, no don't answer that!" She let out a long sigh, the humor in her words getting a tiny smile out of her nervous looking sister. "To answer the other question, yes. I am your sister. I did live with you when you were younger."

"Why did you leave?" Erin asked, abruptly cutting Alanna off. "Was it mom? Because fuck her." She balled up her hands inside her sleeves, and Alanna didn't miss that her sister nervously

flicked her eyes toward the door to make sure that their mother wasn't actually present. "I hate her." She whispered, staring down at the table.

"I hear ya." Alanna nodded. "But no, actually, I didn't leave. You guys did." She pressed her fingertips together. "Hell, what I'm about to say sounds so fuckin' stupid. How does James enjoy this?" She muttered to herself. "Okay. When did you move to Washington?"

"I guess... a couple years? I don't remember much about it, but changing schools was fine." Erin said. "Not like I had friends before."

"Well, that's about the last time I saw you." Alanna said. "And you probably did have friends. Not that most of them will remember you."

"What? What are you *talking* about?" The teenager gave Alanna a confused and slightly annoyed look.

Alanna nodded understandingly. "Alright, here goes. Get on the train to stupid town. Two years ago, an organization moved you guys away and did something to wipe me from your memory, as well as fuzz the memories of you in anyone who knew you previously. They did this to the families of their victims, so there would be fewer questions about the missing people."

"No, stop." Erin pushed her chair back.

"Sorry!" Alanna shrugged, face set in an expression that tried to convey a 'whatcha gonna do?' sort of attitude. "It sucks! I haven't known what happened to you or Rae the whole time. It's just random damn chance someone I know saw your post, and that you had seen me on a video. And I know it sounds dumb, but you *did*, to be fair, watch me teleport. So you know magic is real at least."

"No, no. No it's... special effects." Erin shook her head, looking at Alanna like she was insane. "Why are you *doing* this? Are you fucking with me for fun?" Alanna's sister ramped up her anger rapidly.

Alanna shrugged, poking at the cardboard cup on the table, half full of mediocre cold coffee. "I just... wanted to make sure you were okay." She said. "And to offer to take you and Rae in, if you want to get away. You just aged up, you might be thinking of moving out. Or not, so you can keep Rae safe. Either one makes sense. You're my... you're my sister." Alanna's voice shook. "All the weird shit in my life doesn't mean I don't wanna take care of you."

"But you're saying *really* stupid stuff." Erin said, in that nakedly hostile way that teenagers fell into so easily. "You sound like a psycho!"

"And yet." Alanna held out her hands, palms up. "You recognize me. You don't remember moving. Also, I guess we can skip to the fun part, and I can just offer to show you actual literal

magic.” She rubbed the back of her neck sheepishly as her enhanced empathy instantly caught onto how Erin latched onto those words. “Shoulda led with that. I really should have asked James for advice on this.”

“Is James my secret brother or something?” Erin asked. “How much other dumb shit is there left to go?” Alanna could tell she was curious, but also angry. Not at Alanna exactly, just in general, and that anger was driving her anxiety back. “You just show up, and... and...”

Alanna pulled her hand back from the yellow orb she’d set on the table. It was glowing lightly, a soft golden light that was mostly washed out by the cafe’s poor choice in lightbulbs, but still something. She raised her eyes up to her sister. “I’ve got *worlds* to show you.” Alanna said. “You and Rae annoyed the shit out of me, and you’re the worst younger sisters I’ve ever had, and I feel like I lost my fucking childhood screening for you guys against mom, but you’re also the *best* younger sisters I’ve ever had, and I love you two. And I should have done this before it all went sideways.” She poked the orb, sending it rolling toward her sister.

Erin reached for it on reflex, the sleeve of her hoodie clipping the magical bauble and sending it off the table at high speed. The teen swore, and snapped out a hand after it, and Alanna wanted to laugh as all the gravitas of the moment vanished in a puff of sparkling dust that vanished from the world as it streamed out of her sister’s grasp.

“I’m sor-!” Erin’s panic, which Alanna felt as an almost palpable thing around the girl, vanished abruptly to be replaced by confusion. Confusion, with roots of something else digging into it; the growing feeling of realization, undeniable knowledge that Alanna wasn’t full of shit, and all the accompanied knock-on epiphanies about the flawed understanding of reality. It crept in, ripping into the confusion and worry with something strange and wondrous and *magical*.

Awe.

“What’d you get?” Alanna asked quietly.

“I... I...” Erin pulled her sleeve back to look at her hand, and Alanna suppressed a scowl as she saw her sister’s skin covered in small scars and a few open sores from where she’d clawed at herself. “Magic is real?” She looked up at her big sister, eyes wide. Alanna just nodded at her. “It... I know how to grow a teak tree. Why...?”

“Huh. That’s the closest anyone’s gotten to something useful on their first one.” Alanna disguised her smile by taking a sip of her coffee, and she pulled a grimace as she instantly regretted it. “But yes. Magic is real.” She felt like she had so much to say, and didn’t know where to *start*. “I’ve explored places that shouldn’t be real, and I’ve used so many of those I don’t even know what all I know how to do anymore. I teleport to work, and half my friends aren’t human, and one of the guys I’m dating can clone himself, and I can plug my brain into the internet.” Alanna tried to think of what she was leaving out. “I might be bulletproof.” She added

as an afterthought. “And I want to share it all with you. If... if you want to come with me.” And all of a sudden, that fear was back again.

Her younger sister gnawed at her lip, like she was trying to figure out where to attack that wall of exposition from. “What about Rae?” She asked.

“We can take her too.” Alanna said. “She doesn’t even have to change schools. I’m gonna keep saying *teleporter* until it sinks in.” She paused, thought about it, and then held up her index finger to her lips. “Teleporter.”

“But mom...” Erin started to say, worry written across her soul. “Isn’t there gonna be paperwork, or something?”

“I don’t fucking care.” Alanna stated. “What’s mom gonna do, call the police? Psh. But also, we have a lawyer we’ve been working with that specializes in adoption and family law, so we can make it work.”

“Who *are* you?” Erin asked softly. “Are you really my sister? Am I just going crazy? I feel like I’m going crazy. And... and... wait! If you’re telling the truth, that means there’s someone out there who can just make me forget again!” As she said the words, Alanna could practically *feel* her sister’s body tensing up. It was almost exactly the same thing James did when he was having a panic attack, interestingly.

Alanna held out a hand, and took Erin’s own balled fist through her sleeve. “Hey.” She said comfortingly. “It’s fine. You don’t have to worry about them.”

“Really?!” The word came out as half scream, half squeak. “They made me *forget you!* And I’m not supposed to *worry?!!*” Erin was hyperventilating now.

“Really.” Alanna nodded. “They’re gone. And I’m not.”

The calm words snapped her sister’s panic short. “...why are they gone?”

“Because I have more friends than they expected, and we had the element of surprise on our side.” Alanna answered. “There’s a lot of horrible shit in the world. And all of it’s on our checklist.”

“Are you a fucking *superhero?*” Erin asked, as incredulous as a teenager could possibly be, which was really pretty deep into the emotion. “That’s stupid!”

Alanna scoffed. “Okay, hang on kid. I’m not that much of a hero. And I’m barely super.”

“You said you were bulletproof!”

“Probably.”

“That.... I don’t... what...” Erin was halfway between being a wide eyed confused mess, and just screaming and storming out. Alanna would have found it funny, if she didn’t recognize how the constant exposure to a parent who lied to you all the time might have left her sister without a clear grasp on what was and wasn’t real.

So she decided to make it either better, or worse, depending on how things went. “Hey, do you wanna come see our secret lair?” She asked with an earnest smile. “You can meet a friend of mine, who is a two hundred pound snake made out of power cables.”

“Are you fucking serious?” Erin demanded.

“Yeah, his name is Smoke-And-Ember. A lot of the camracondas named themselves after things they found to be, like, emotionally impactful? They didn’t have a lot of beauty in their lives when we rescued them. Anyway we solve crimes together. You’ll like him.” Alanna pulled out her telepad, and shot Cathy a nod where the other woman was waiting at the counter. “If you want to, obviously. You know. Just kinda throw you in the deep end, let you see everything I’ve got.” Alanna wasn’t sure if this was a great idea, and she was aware she was rambling a bit. “Maybe meet one of the people I’m dating, they’re all cool. Or, like, Planner. Planner’s a ghost octopus thing? I feel like I should be explaining so much, and I don’t know what I’m doing. I just wanna show you *everything*, and hope you’ll like it, and then offer you a magic apartment in our basement. Magic is real. Did I say that?”

Erin stared at her, mouth open, for a good minute. Then she said something that hit Alanna a lot harder than she’d been expecting from this conversation. “Mom really fucked you up too, huh?” Her sister said quietly.

“Okay ow.” Alanna instantly replied, almost as a joke. And then, as the words sank in, she set the telepad down on the table and looked away from the younger girl. “Ow.” She whispered.

“S-sorry...”

“Nah, it’s cool.” Alanna waved off the apology. “You aren’t wrong. But whatever. I’ve got some cool stuff in my life, I wanna share it, and now that we’ve found you, I *really* want to make sure you and Rae are safe.”

“...okay.” Erin said suddenly, nodding. “Okay. I... I trust you. For some reason. You’re *barely* familiar, and I don’t remember you, but I trust you. Can we go pick her up before we go?”

Alanna grinned widely, eyes sparkling. “Sure! Gimmie the address.” She commanded, flipping the telepad page and starting a new line. “And... and thanks. You know, for remembering me at all.” Alanna said, staring at the page as she wrote. “Not like it was a choice to forget, but...” She looked up and met Erin’s eyes. “A lot of people... my boyfriend’s family is just *gone*. No

hint of them anywhere, they probably don't know he even existed. So thanks for remembering me. So we could find you."

She reached out a hand, and Erin looked at it warily before taking it. "Is this gonna feel weird?" She asked.

"Yes!" Alanna cheerfully said, hauling her sister to her feet, and then tearing the telepad with her teeth.

There was something deeply odd about Anesh's life.

He blamed James, mostly. If James hadn't been the kind of person who followed up on weird events that could easily have been exhaustion-induced hallucinations, then Anesh could have gone his whole time in the country without being attacked by a single piece of furniture.

As it was, he was starting to wonder what he was going to do, in regards to being in the country. On a functional level, it didn't matter; customs and immigration was for people who couldn't teleport. But he wasn't a student anymore, and he was in the process of quitting his job at NASA, and so he didn't have much left that would convince the US government to let him stay.

The thought chafed. Anesh felt like he'd been through so much wankery on this continent that they should give him an apology and a commemorative plaque, not a ticket 'home'. He'd saved at least a few lives, that had to be worth a medal or something.

It was a pretty direct way of getting him on board with James' whole 'borders are stupid' idea. But it still worked.

That wasn't the surreal part though. The surreal part was that he wasn't taking classes anymore. It had been a trick to do it all while he was still doing stuff with the Order, but he had a trick. Being a few people who shared memories and had excellent reading retention had let Anesh continue to climb his way through progressively more questionably useful forms of maths. But now, he was... done. No more classes.

And what was he going to do, as one of the most skilled people in his field in the world? Well, his original plan had been to go into space travel. It was something of a childhood fantasy that had grown up with him; Anesh didn't want warp drives and laser turrets, he wanted to colonize Mars and mine the asteroid belt. But it had all been very abstract, right up until a government organization hired him to help them design space probes.

This was where it really got surreal. Because working on his dream job had gotten somewhat less satisfying when it hadn't involved magic.

James had infected his life with the strange, and Anesh *loved* it, and he hated James for that. But also he loved James, so it was a deeply conflicted time for him.

He said as much to Reed, and got a blank stare in return before Reed just told him that if he really wanted to play with space travel, he should spend more time in Research. So Anesh, unshackled from a lot of his previous responsibilities, started doing exactly that.

The Research division of the Order of Endless Rooms was, Anesh realized, a messy and chaotic nightmare. Like his boyfriend, he'd fallen into the apparently incorrect habit of thinking of them as a group of professionals, who did careful tests, and then wrote reports about the results that the Order could make use of. The reality of the happenings in their basement levels was *far* from that calm idea of generic science.

Humans, camracondas, infomorphs, and engineers spend their time here, a lot of them with their own personal projects and weird ideas stacked on top of things resembling job duties. One of the first people Anesh had talked to just to get directions, a younger man named John, was seemingly the lone person assigned to testing magical pens, but also had a secondary study going on the different types of yellow orb absorption effects, and *also* was one of the testers for the verified-safe potion brews. He was the most normal person down here.

Tyrone, a human Anesh had honestly thought had *died* he hadn't seen him in so long, was working with an inhabitator and a camraconda trying to get the magical emerald computer chips to grow a protocol for cross-species skulljack hive minds that didn't cause migraines. Red and Nile, the pair of ex-Alchemists, argued *loudly* with Nik about repeating tests that had already proven lethal to lab rats. Watcher-Of-Birds took a break from setting up identification-strain iLipedes on a batch of Akashic Sewer lesson books to feed the pod of shellaxies their daily meal of bugs. One entire side room had been taken over by engineers that had lined the walls with white boards and the floor with roped off sections that held their current space elevator test models.

Anesh stepped aside to let a delightfully excited looking ratroach that was shorter than even he was rush by, a small cloth bag held in every one of their four claws. That, more than anything, made him feel good. A lot of the people in the Order right now came from shitty places, but *no one* deserved to be having a good time more than the ratroaches.

Another turn down a hall, the concrete walls around him feeling oddly welcoming despite the fact that he maybe should have felt claustrophobic here underground in a cramped stone tunnel. And then Anesh found where he was headed today.

Pushing open the door on the corner of the four way intersection of basement halls, he stepped into a room that was about six times larger than it should have been if you judged it by what it looked like outside. "Oh hey!" Momo greeted him with a wave from across the open space. "You made it!"

“Despite your directions, yes.” Anesh said, entering the room full of lined up furniture and letting the door swing shut with a heavy clunk of the metal latch.

“Being fair, people keep adding to the basement.” The camraconda curled up on one of the couches said. “Hello. I am Paper-And-Words.”

“Nice to meet you. I’m Anesh.” He looked around for anyone else he didn’t know yet. There was a dark skinned man about his age standing on the other side of the room and flicking his bright eyes between the clipboard he was holding and the inventory of the room itself. “Hey Juan.” Anesh got a wave back at his words, but Juan didn’t stop staring suspiciously at the furniture.

There was a good chunk of furniture in here, too. The room, spatially expanded via orange totem probably, had three couches, eight dining chairs, one padded office chair, five lamps, a flimsy looking pale wood shelf, and a fancy looking oval oak table that was currently expanded to its full size of about twelve feet long. There was also a fake plant, which Anesh pointed at with raised eyebrows before making a judgment.

“Hm?” Momo followed his finger. “Oh. That’s Tyrannadonny. She’s new, be nice.”

“I... I can’t. That name. I can’t even.” Anesh took a long breath. “Why, Momo?” He asked. “I feel like I’m taking over James’ role of just asking you ‘why’ all the time.”

“I *did* think that might be why you were down here!” Momo nodded vigorously, the crown of yellow number two pencils orbiting her head bobbing with her in perfect sync. “Anyway, she liked the name so we went with it. *Also*, you might be interested, Tyrannadonny here is - don’t give me that look! - she’s the first living plant from *here*.”

Anesh realized he might be being a bit of an asshole, so he let it go and turned to face the new Life, which apparently had been made here on Earth and not actually in any dungeon. “Alright, that’s cool. Pleasure to meet you.” He gave a short bow, and smiled as the broad plastic leaves mimicked it, a couple of the large buds opening to reveal felt red blossoms that tracked him like eyes. “So, is this all the furniture?” He asked, moving on to what Momo had invited him here for.

“Yiss.” She said, flapping the black bathrobe she was wearing as she turned to look over the collection of random stuff. “One butchered giant monster’s worth of living room!”

An Anesh had helped with part of that process. He was glad the stuff had been cleaned off before being put here for storage and testing; the slimy mess of the creature’s insides wasn’t exactly a pleasant smell. “We should really figure out how to critically wound a dungeon.” He muttered.

"It's on the list!" Momo shoved her hands into her robe's pockets. "I think we should just teleport chunks of the ocean into them until they give up!"

"That sounds... uh..." Anesh didn't really have a good answer for that.

Juan did. "Every single person you tell that to tries really politely to not call you a dumbass for saying it." He glanced over at her from his clipboard with a look that said he'd seen this conversation repeatedly.

"I wasn't thinking that exactly, but yes." Anesh agreed. "We need the ocean for things, probably. I dunno, I'm not a marine biologist yet." The best part of the magic, he recognized, was that 'yet' was a constant. He was going to be a marine biologist someday. He was going to learn so much, through the application of a lifestyle of dungeon nonsense. "The beacon we left in there is still going, right?"

"Yeah." Momo nodded. "I'm going back to join the search team later. Which is a lot of people, actually; it's why Research is so empty today. Oh, it's just in Missouri now, whatever was in Japan is gone."

"Ominous. Also *empty*?" Anesh looked back at the door to the rest of the labyrinthine laboratory.

The plant - Tyrannadonny, he supposed he should get used to her actual name - rustled at him in agreement. Juan nodded along and hummed softly, like he somehow understood something that Anesh hadn't picked up.

Anesh moved on. "Well, since we can't kill it yet, at least we can loot it. What does any of this *do* though?"

"We know very little." Paper-And-Words said, the digital voice of the newer camraconda to join the Order still somewhat unpracticed, flat and bored sounding words undercut by the excitement in their body language. "All iLipede results come back as... useless."

Momo made a noise of mild disagreement. "Not *useless*. They tell us the things are magic, just because they take way too long to scan them. But yeah, they mostly give weird statistics. Like, 'couch, three cushions, eight causality violations'. It's kind of a headache. Juan has the list if you wanna check it out."

Circling around the band of clear space on the outside of the grid of furniture, Juan approached Anesh and held out the clipboard to him. "Momo's lying again. None of them violated causality. Though that lamp... third one in, there... that's the one that 'saved one life'. So that's weird and unexplained. Oh, also, none of it's alive. We checked."

"I hadn't thought to check." Anesh admitted. "I kind of assumed... inanimate."

“A totally unreasonable assumption in this building.” Paper-And-Words said, stretching out on the couch so that their tail poked a bare inch over the cushioned arm.

Anesh didn't disagree, he should be better about that. “So, what does the couch you're on do?” He asked as he scanned the notes and found there wasn't anything about it.

“It is comfortable.” The camraconda replied.

Momo sighed. “I tried to tell him not to do that.” She said. “But, like... it's magic, it doesn't set off any of our warnings, it doesn't *seem* like a trap? I had Speaky take a look at it, and she didn't say it was harmful or anything. So we're kinda down to the sort of testing we do with pens.”

“Get John to do it?” Anesh asked.

“Hm?” Juan looked up; he'd stolen the clipboard back at some point and had returned to flicking his eyes between it and the floor. He wasn't paying full attention.

“No, *John*.” Anesh said. “The kid who... you work here, you know.”

“Oh. Yeah. And yeah also, nothing to do but use it until it becomes clear.” Juan shrugged.

Anesh knew that feeling. He'd encountered a *lot* of weird magic when he and James had gone delving that just... didn't do anything obvious or even useful. Not everything could be a clearly helpful as the Lunchbox of Holding Lunch, or the plant pot that had become the backbone for their potion creation operations.

So he got down to helping the others slowly and methodically test each piece of furniture. It wasn't exactly exciting; sitting in a chair for half an hour and recording how you felt afterward didn't really make him feel like he was being useful. But as far as they knew about the Stratified Underburbs, there were two things magic items were good for. Being magic, or breaking to make skill crystals. And while the skill crystals sounded like one of the more useful things the Order had come across, they didn't want to break something without knowing what it *did* first.

This was the real surreal part. Not that the furniture was magic, but that they *knew* it was magic, and that it was boring anyway. Trying to figure out if a couch let you breathe fire or a chair made your eyesight better or *something* was just a process of trying a list of ideas over and over again, making tedious notes, and getting basically nowhere. Anesh often tried to build mathematical models of how different magics worked; he'd tried with the red totems and still had arguments with Momo about it. But math was at least an engaging way for him to view the world. This wasn't even that. It was just a lot of nothing happening to verify that the thing happening was nothing. At least, right up until the moment something happened.

Two hours later, he and the others were sitting on the sidelines staring at the one lamp that was on when Anesh suddenly felt like something clicked in his head. “You know...” he started to say.

“...it seems likely that any effects of furniture would be tied to its use as furniture...” Juan continued, turning his eyes toward Anesh with a look of confused surprise.

“...which would imply that long term use, or use over time, is optimal...” Paper-And-Words kept staring at the lamp, perhaps not realizing they were adding onto the others.

“...so they probably work on *rooms*, not people. *Fuck.*” Momo finished, snapping her head around at the others. “What the fuck was *that*?!”

Anesh felt his brain racing to catch up, aided by one of the earlier yellow orb skills he’d gotten and a few years of dealing with this kind of thing. “That was *us.*” He said as connections formed almost unbidden. “That was a few bits of ideas from each of us, slapped together, into a coherent thought.” He pointed at the standing lamp still lit up off on the side of the furniture grid. “Abstract illumination. Guiding us to a unified conclusion. And isn’t that just a bit mad?” He let out a nervous laugh. “Now, the obvious question...”

Paper-And-Words raised his body up, titling their sleek camera head sideways ninety degrees like he could somehow understand the magic if he could get a better angle on it. “Is the conclusion correct?”

“That, and how often does that happen?” Momo asked, stepping forward like she was considering stabbing the lamp. Anesh almost thought it was funny, until he saw the ring of floating pencils around her head lined up like a spiked crown and angled at the lamp. “I don’t like this one.”

“Really?” Anesh asked, surprised. “You don’t want to, say, stick this in the middle of the Research chaosium?”

“The what?” Momo’s nervous anger dropped away briefly as she eyed Anesh.

He shrugged. “I don’t know, whatever you all call the central part of this floor where everyone has a kind of ongoing disorganized mess of projects going on.”

“Oh. Yeah, I guess you could call it that. It’s really not that bad.” She defended her loosely affiliated team. “I’m just not into stuff that can mess with my head.”

“Same.” Juan added.

“I think I’m gonna veto your distaste.” Anesh sighed. “Sorry, but we should at least see if this one gets us to correct information. That’s *far* too valuable to pass up.” He got a grudging nod

from Momo, though the other human in the room seemed distracted again. “Also, Juan, are you looking for the eighth chair?”

“Yes!” The man yelled abruptly. “How do you *know that?!?*” He barked out with obvious frustration.

Anesh bobbed his fingers along the grid where they’d put the furniture. “You’re missing a spot there, and it matches the missing line on your list there. Antimeme chair. I vote for breaking that one.”

“Sold!” Momo said, hoisting a crowbar as next to her, Paper-And-Words rose up from the floor with a hammer clutched in his mouth. “That thing’s been pissing me off every time I remember it and then forget it again!”

“Why is an antimeme chair considered a safe magic item, anyway?” Anesh asked. “Why was it a *reward?*”

“Maybe it stacks the effect to anyone who sits in it? Also it could be not a reward at all, the thing was just growing magic chairs in its ass. It could have been making traps for all we know.” Juan asked as he grabbed the chair none of them had looked at for the last hour and dragged it off to the side for its upcoming execution. “Or maybe the room itself, if the lamp is... we should turn off the lamp.”

Anesh turned off the lamp. “I don’t feel any different.” He said. “Maybe it doesn’t actually matter if it’s on? Maybe it’s something else doing that.”

“If you’re asking, and we aren’t all making some conclusion, that probably means it’s not working.” Juan offered. “You sure we should keep that one?”

“Positive.” Anesh said, already planning out a series of double blind tests with different groups to figure out how effective it might be.

By the end of the day, they were left with three skill crystals from the furniture that *really* hadn’t worked out. The trouble was, they didn’t know what the furniture they *couldn’t* identify did. So they didn’t break it yet. Instead, moving to another room to investigate the skill crystals and talk about a plan for using them.

“The biggest problem with these things is that we need to engage with the fucking Underburbs to get points for them.” Momo said, poking one of the pointy rocks sitting on the table amidst the takeout they’d had for dinner. “Most people have two, camracondas don’t have *any*, and James has, like, fifty. And aside from reinfesting people with the arm hole fever nightmare disease, we don’t have a way to get more?”

“Please tell me we don’t have a way to reinfect people.” Anesh jolted to alert status. “Because I have a problem with that. We should all have a problem with that.”

“It’s the people who are still carriers.” Momo said. “Deb’s keeping them under isolation, but they’re still contagious. I think? We should check with her.”

“Done.” Juan said, staring into nothing as he accessed the local network through his skulljack. “It’s airborne and spreads aggressively through contact, and according to the current information packet she has posted, the carriers won’t start processing it at *all* until they infect someone else.” He blinked and looked back at them, running a finger down the sharp line of his nose. “Maybe we can loop carriers.”

“No.” Anesh said, cutting that off. “I mean, yes, that might work. But no we’re not doing that. We’ll go delving in hazmat suits like sane people.”

“What about me?” Paper-And-Words asked, bland digital voice mixing with nervous swaying and a flicking tongue. “I want skill points.”

Anesh barely stopped himself from reflexively petting the camraconda’s head like he was a dog. “James said you can still get points from other methods. We’ll work it out. For now, how do we test these things?” He poked a skill crystal. “Just pick one each and go from there?”

Surprisingly, Momo had a comprehensive answer that Anesh honestly hadn’t expected from the girl. He had to remind himself that while she came across as flighty and, as his boyfriend put it, ‘maximum gremlin’, she was actually sharp when she wanted to be. “We need to test multiple things. Not just what each one gives, but also, side uses. Can two people split the cost? Does the cost escalate with use? Do they wear out? Can we infuse them to make magic items like we do with blue orbs? Actually, on that note, can we make magic items with *just skill points*? We should be testing these across multiple crystals, too. According to James, the one we already have...” She held up the one that had duct tape around it and a written label. “Takes three points, which none of us have. If they *all* take that, we’re mildly screwed. We could hold off on it, or we can get James and Zhu to be our test cases since they have more.”

“We should try them anyway.” Anesh said. “Because the worst case is that we’re down two points of something that we plan on securing a supply of later *anyway*. And the best case is that we figure out what each of these are.”

“Hold up. Zhu has skill points?” Juan asked. “I remember Planner got infected, but I hadn’t... put that together. Also, I’ll take this one.” He picked up a crystal, showed the numbered label on it to Momo, and focused for a second. “Oh. Uh. Two points in, and I got a skill rank in construction comma carpentry comma screw driving.”

Anesh took the notes away from Momo and replaced what she’d written with a much cleaner line of the same text. The girl’s handwriting was a nightmare. Then he took the crystal from

Juan. "Okay, well, I hate this, but I want to make sure..." He closed his eyes, and focused on the skill points he knew he had. Tried to shove them out into the crystal. The process was surprisingly easy; there wasn't a lot of mental gymnastics like getting the Office orbs to do anything they didn't want to. A second later, he got a familiar and alien thought.

[+1 Skill Rank : Construction - Carpentry - Screw Driving]

"Exactly the same. Also *dash* not *comma*."

"I will not have this argument with you." Juan flatly stated, picking a cold fry out of their leftovers. "Momo?"

"Oh, fine, I'll try this one." She said. "Sorry you're missing out, by the way, Papers."

The camraconda didn't know how to make their voice contain the mildly sarcastic infliction they wanted, but it didn't really matter. It came across as they spoke. "I think I will survive being unable to screw wood." He said, arcing his head from side to side.

"Touché." Momo shrugged, and blinked as she poured her own skill points into the crystal she'd chosen. "Nada. Welp. Number two here takes more than I had. Oh! Remind me to come back to this later, we'll see if they save over time."

"Or we could get James, or anyone else really, to try it out and see if we can 'share' points this way." Paper-And-Words offered. "Now that we know that crystals repeat the same useless skills."

"Getting James to test these might be hard." Momo spoke partly to herself. "He's got that whole thing about not taking magic powers for himself."

Anesh shot a small smile at her. "I know what you mean, but I think this one will be easier. He's already got the skill points, and Zhu at least would be excited to try. Also, I don't know if you've talked to him since he got back..." he met her eyes, and saw that Momo hadn't. "Well. He's being more practical about his paladin title." Anesh said. "So this should be easy to get him on board with."

"I've been wondering about that." Juan said. "We're not religious, right?"

"Well, I'm not." Momo said instantly, like the words triggered some kind of automated system in her mouth.

Paper-And-Words tilted their head back to stare at the ceiling. "I do not know what religions are and no one will give me a real answer." They said. "I tried asking the internet. It did not work either."

Anesh shared a pained look with the humans in the room. "I... uh..." He didn't even know what to say to that. So he just tried to move past it. "So!" His voice came out strained. "The paladin thing is like the fantasy version, not the... Catholic one? There's a thing in the guidebook about it. It's not religious, it just means that James' official job is helping people and being a hero, and he's actually starting to take it seriously."

"Did he not before?" Momo rolled her eyes.

"Okay, wait, hang on. I've met James." Juan idly poked at one of the pencils around Momo as it floated past him, sending it spinning. "I can see him doing that."

"Yeah, he's a bit dumb. But I still love him." Anesh glanced toward the door. "Anyway. Should we go find him and use his skill points for our own knowledge?"

"Yes. Also bring the lamp." Momo said, standing up aggressively enough to send her chair sliding backward. Juan rose more like a regular human did and silently replaced the dismissed piece of seating like this was a normal thing that happened. "If we're keeping it, let's keep it away from where I do my work. I'm still suspicious of that thing." She'd voiced that repeatedly during their testing, and took the opportunity to do so again.

Anesh didn't even bother to sigh. He just went to find a hand cart, and call his boyfriend.

EI's life had been pretty good lately. A bit weird though.

Route Horizon stretched out ahead of her; the biggest challenge of the dungeon being mile after mile of blazing hot desert and the risk of running out of gas. Her car thrummed under her, every rumble of the engine and turn of the tires a feeling she was sharply familiar with. She knew her car. She didn't know the road, exactly, but they weren't anywhere near one of the tangled knots of interchange onramps, and there also wasn't anything this close to the entrance that had a hope in hell of catching her.

She missed this place. Didn't have as many chances to come back here these days, with how busy she was running one of the youth groups and surviving the wizard plague James had express mailed into the Lair. But now she'd taken a chance to spend a little time here, and also solve one of the problems her role as a responsible adult had given her.

"This place has two suns!" Morgan had his head stuck out the window, staring up at the sky. EI had made sure to give the kid sunglasses for exactly this reason, but it probably still wasn't a great idea. "This is so cool! I mean... uh..."

It was really hard to keep up a grumpy teenager attitude when faced with a dungeon that was, in EI's own opinion, so cool. It was just the two of them in the car, with the kid occupying her

passenger seat. El knew she'd probably catch hell for it later, but honestly, some people had a really warped view of this place and how dangerous it was. As long as you didn't try to full-clear the parking structures, stayed away from the mountains, and used the shadows of the gas stations to your advantage, it was pretty safe. She'd gotten through a bunch of trips in here without ever getting in a single fight.

Basically, what El was saying, was that it wasn't *her* fault that James pissed off every living thing within a ten mile radius of himself.

What she was saying out loud was less disparaging. "It's pretty sweet, yeah." Her voice rose to speak over the engine and the rush of hot air through her windows. El hadn't put the top down; she wasn't *that* reckless. But it would have been a great day for it, especially since her car had a new setting for the AC that was basically a force field. Messed with the transmission though, she was still working on it. "Check that out!" Her call caught Morgan's attention, and he followed El's pointed finger through the windshield toward the sky.

Overhead, a security condor drifted on the thermals. It was hard to see from down here at this angle, but the bird was both massive, and a blatant disregard for the rules of biology. What looked like a tiny blot of color against the pure blue sky was actually a six, maybe eight foot wide set of wings, with any number of articulated security cameras in place of a head. Like a hydra, only somehow probably less aerodynamic.

It wasn't watching them. Sometimes they did, which could be a problem. El didn't actually know what the things *did*, but they had some kind of sight-based attack that screwed with her perception of the world around her. It had never gotten her to crash, but it had messed her up a few times in the past. Fortunately the big vultures didn't seem to care about people who were just out on the open road.

"Woah." Morgan said as he leaned over the dash to look upward. A glint of light off the creature made him blink. "It's metal?" He asked.

"It's got camera heads." El said. "Kinda familiar, in a weird way."

"...Yeah." Morgan shot a glance at her, then looked back away, keeping his eyes on anything except El.

El kept her eyes on the road. Unlike most movie protagonists, she couldn't drive if she wasn't watching the highway, whether or not it was on Earth. "I'm not baiting you, Morgan." She rolled her eyes anyway. "It's actually just weird and *interesting* that we've got camracondas, and the security condors." She put emphasis on the word that half the Order seemed to have an addiction to.

"Not camracondors?" Morgan asked. "Or... uh... camcondors?"

“You’re way too young to know what a camcorder is.” El snorted. *She* was too young, and she was twenty six. The most contact she’d ever had with one of those was, she was pretty sure, breaking one when she was three years old. “Also camraconda works because of the anaconda pun. Condor doesn’t have the same... uh... up-down-up-down thing.”

“Cadence.” Morgan supplied, the teenager leaping at the opportunity to show how smart he was.

El hid a smile. “Yeah, that. So security condor, because it plays off security *cordon*. And because condor is just a really fun word on its own that we don’t use enough, since humanity has decided to wipe out all wildlife or some shit.” She flicked her eyes across the horizon as they passed an arch of street signs that reached halfway over the road, making sure she hadn’t just tripped an ambush. “But yeah. I’m not trying to trick you into talking.”

“Okay.” Morgan said eventually, slouching back into the chair. His body language was guarded, but at least, El reasoned, he hadn’t crossed his arms and folded up like her apparent girlfriend did when challenged on her choice of dress.

El shook that off. “Yeah, I’m just gonna ask you directly about it in a minute here. Unless you wanna start that conversation now?”

“God dammit.” Morgan swore badly. The kind of teenager swearing where he’d learned that the words were *curse words*, and so was self conscious saying them out loud, especially around one of the designated adults in his life. “Do we have to?”

“Pff. No.” El shrugged. “We can just hang out for a while, maybe go into one of the empty buildings where there’s no threats to your life and poke around. See if we can find some kind of magic plant. I dunno. And then head back, and pretend everything’s fine, and that you don’t need help, and that every problem will go away if you ignore it long enough.”

El had been taking lessons from the actual childcare specialists the Order had hired, as well as one of their therapists, and also just trying to learn on her own. But the academic knowledge didn’t easily translate into her controlling her sarcastic nature.

“You suck.” Morgan grumbled. But there was no vitriol behind it, and El didn’t take it personally. Just chuckled under her breath and kept driving. “Fine.” Morgan said after the quiet stretched on.

“Fine?”

“Fine, I’ll talk about it.”

“Alright!” El perked up. “So, let’s get a thing out of the way. You’re not in trouble, okay?” Morgan gave her a nervous nod. “Cause that would be stupid. This also isn’t an interrogation

or something. I'm just... here for you to talk to. Since you seem like you've been having a hard time lately."

"Why in here though?" Morgan sounded like he was trying to hide his curiosity.

EI fluidly moved the car across the open road in a long arc that dodged them around a pothole that had a fifty fifty chance of being a trap. "Because the Horizon is cool, and it's away from everyone else, and also you need to get some sun."

"But... monsters?" He asked.

"Do *you* care?" EI countered. Morgan thought about it, then shook his head. "Exactly. So. What's going on? I've got the broad strokes, but, like, fill me in."

Morgan started talking, and the whole thing made EI fondly remember the time when she was his age and small problems felt like they encompassed a whole lifetime. Because, from that perspective, they *did*. One of the things that had been hard for her to learn was to get over the feeling of thinking that just because she'd learned something or matured somehow, that everyone else *had to* have kept up with her. Morgan was *barely seventeen*, he barely knew how to express himself, and that showed in how EI had to patch together the story through his nervous and often held-back explanation. So she did what she was learning how to do, and *listened*.

The core of it, though, was simple. It just took him twenty minutes to explain, with a short break for them to park at a gas station and duck down as a dune bug rolled past a half mile out in the desert.

"So," EI said as they cowered below the windows, tracking the creature with a compact mirror as she spoke. "What I'm getting here is that you're in a love triangle, and it's bothering you that you've become an anime trope."

"No!" He hissed, as if worried the thing thousands of feet away could hear him.

"You fell for your two best friends and don't know what to do without making things weird and now you're acting like a panicked moron and everyone's noticed, meaning you crafted an elaborate self-fulfilling prophecy for yourself." EI snorted as she switched her mirror to her other hand and tried to work out the ache in her elbow. "Also you *did* almost get in a fight with Brian. So."

"You make it sound really stupid." Morgan tried glaring at her, and then at the glovebox when he couldn't keep his neck at the right angle while hiding. "Like, I know I'm an idiot, okay? Happy?"

EI felt bad instantly. "Oh, kid, no. Morgan. Hey. You're not an idiot." EI tried to make her voice sound sympathetic without being pitying. "Or, well, you *are*, but you're an idiot in a way that's

deeply human and perfectly normal.” She paused. “I’m not doing a good job at this.” El said with a sigh. “Look, the point is, you didn’t screw anything up beyond repair. People are just worried about you.”

“Yeah, because I’m *stupid*.” Morgan snapped back. “Because I can’t even have normal friends without screwing it up.”

“Okay, first off, none of your friends are normal, fuck off.” El replied instantly, and felt vindicated when she got an unexpected smile from him. “Also, remember what we talked about last week? About how we talk about ourselves?”

Morgan sighed. “Alright, fine. I’m not stupid, I *did something stupid*.” He sounded annoyed about the distinction.

El nodded. “Right. So, how do you stop doing something stupid then? What’s your plan of attack here? Because - oh, hold up.” She tipped the mirror slightly and caught sight of one of the security condors landing nearby. “Hm.” El pulled the lever on the side of her chair, tipping it backward and letting her contort her arm around to grab the sawn off shotgun she kept under the driver’s seat. “That’s probably fine. Anyway.” She ignored Morgan’s wide eyed stare. “Pretend this isn’t a problem. So, what’s your plan?”

“I... uh...!” Morgan pressed himself farther down in his hiding spot. “Shouldn’t you... uh...?”

“Oh, it’s fine. It’ll fly off in a second.” El said. “The car’s gone too. We’re fine. Look, this place is honestly really peaceful if you don’t fuck with it too much.” She rubbed at the side of her face, the cold skin of her hand blocking the burning suns for a moment of relief. “Except the heat. That part sucks.”

“Better than the Mountain.” Morgan said.

“Oh, yeah, for sure.” El agreed with him eagerly. “That place *sucks*, dude. But don’t get sidetracked, you... oh, see? Condor’s gone. Easy.” She popped her chair back up. “You gonna stay down there?” She looked over at Morgan still mostly on the cramped floor of her passenger side.

He crawled his way back up as she slowly accelerated and pointed them back toward the gap between her and reality. “I don’t even know what a plan is supposed to do.”

“Oh, nothing. You have to actually do stuff.” El said as she drove. “I know, it sucks, I hated learning this too.” She shook her head in mock pity as Morgan tried not to laugh. “Look, what I’m saying is, *you tell me*; if one of your friends had a crush on you, how would you want them to handle that?”

“I’d... want them to tell me?”

“Uh huh.”

“But I can’t just *tell* them!”

“Uh huh.”

“Because it’s weird, right? And... then if one of them hates me, it ruins everything.”

“Uh *huh*.”

“...but I’m already ruining everything.” Morgan stared out his side window, propping his chin up on his arm as he braced himself against the frame of the car.

“Uh huh.”

“Um... can I ask something?” He looked back over at El, and she nodded at him encouragingly. “How do you deal with it?”

“With what, communication?” El asked. “Not great, I won’t lie. I’m working on some shit, but I still don’t talk as much as I should. Do you mean, like, romantically?” Morgan nodded at her, and El tried to stamp down the impulse to say that she thought her last girlfriend got eaten by the dungeon they were in, and that her current one was probably on track to a similar fate. “Look. I don’t know everything.” She rolled her eyes at the shocked look on the kid’s face. “Shut up. All I know is, everything in my life got better when everyone just started saying what they meant all the time, okay? And we can’t force other people to do it, but if *we’re* honest, and we’re kind to other people being honest, we might get away with it. And it’s so much fucking easier.”

Morgan shrank down in his seat again. “But it’s scary.”

“Everything’s scary.” El shrugged. “Is that an excuse?”

“...I should talk to Color-Of-Dawn and Liz, huh?” The teenager said as El took them through a merge with another strip of highway that flowed like a river, and began to look for the last turn that would return them to Earth. “I... I should apologize to Brian too.”

El shrugged. “Is that your *plan*?” She asked. “Work it out, either to me or in your head, first. Just remember, kid; you and your friends have all survived more shit than most people *ever* encounter, and all of you combined are barely my age. You think it’s weird that you wanna date a camraconda? You nearly got eaten by an aggressive piece of terrain once, your love life isn’t *weird*. What’s weird is that you’re a teenager who’s considering the value of an apology to the dude you tried to hit with a chair. That’s cool, though. No joke.”

As the car punched back through the membrane between worlds, Morgan added one more thing. “Thanks.” He said. “For... I dunno, caring. I know everyone at the Lair *does* care. But... I’m not used to it? Thanks. And also you swear more than most teachers. *That’s* weird.”

“I’m not a teacher.” El laughed at the words in an incredulous protest.

“Uh huh.”

Arrush wondered if his life was strange.

As he sank into the warm waters of the pool in the Lair’s basement, colored light dancing in geometric shapes off the surface and illuminating the copper designs in the pipes overhead, he spared a moment to remember that this was very far from what he had been created for.

Humans weren’t created for anything. Arrush was though. And this wasn’t it.

Across from him, Bill, the human that he had been helping move drywall all day, dropped into the water like an unwieldy projectile. The broad man had more fur than Arrush did, but still wore one of the modesty towels that a lot of people still preferred. Well, a lot of the humans. Arrush wasn’t sure if *that* was strange either.

He wasn’t ignorant of broader human culture. He knew this public bath was an oddity, though as the warm water soaked into his multitudinous joints and slightly eased the pain that never really went away, he decided he didn’t care. He knew that nudity was a human taboo, but the more everyone here treated the shared baths as normal, the less it mattered to anyone, as evidenced by Bill catching his wife as she jumped in after him.

The two humans laughed as Arrush sunk himself down farther in the pool until only half his eyes and antenna were above the water. The two humans were older; a distinction that he *still* didn’t fully understand. Both of them were upgraded with enough purple orbs now that they seemed... normal?

Arrush didn’t know what it meant to be normal. He understood, in the abstract, the concept of aging, and of death from old age. As far as anyone could tell, that was what had happened to the iLipede he’d adopted from Officium Mundi. And it was *sad*, but more than that, it didn’t feel as normal as the humans all said it was. It felt wrong.

It felt like *him*. Ugly, and violent, and created with the intent to harm.

Bill and Marcey didn’t seem to be harmed by having aged. Which was nice. Arrush would ask Bill about it later, maybe. When they were working, and it didn’t feel like he was intruding.

A group of humans and camraondas moved past their pool, into one of the adjacent ones, before pulling the privacy screen halfway shut. Talking and laughing, spending time together here like it was a common occurrence for them. Which it probably was, but Arrush still wondered at it. He *knew* that the Order had other species before he and Keeka had arrived, but was it strange that they all got along so well? Or was it normal?

What was the normal state for people, if it was so easy for a place like this to become comfortable? Arrush had so many questions about *people*, and never knew if he should be asking.

He sighed, and then realized he was underwater and jerked upright, coughing and sputtering at the water he'd just inhaled.

"You okay there?" Bill asked, concern written on the man's face. He pushed himself off his side of the pool and moved to help, but stopped short of thumping Arrush on the back. That barely worked for humans, and almost certainly would hurt the ratroach, no matter how big he was compared to the others. "What should I do?" He flicked a worried look toward his wife.

"Am fine." Arrush coughed out. "Thank you." He sank back down, finding a smooth spot to sit in the pool that didn't leave him partly underwater, while Bill tugged at his waterlogged beard like he was still worried. "Really. Fine."

"Alright, well, don't go drowning on me." Bill said as he let himself float in the middle of the shared pool. "You're my best helper."

Marcey slapped a wave of water at her husband. "Don't say that!" She said, before shaking her head as Bill sputtered and flailed, turning to Arrush. "He means he cares about you, and is glad you're alright." She translated.

Arrush nodded. He'd gotten that impression from Bill, though it had taken some time for him to realize that some humans were much more obfuscated in their emotions than James and his closer friends were. He didn't know if *that* was normal either.

But he didn't really care. It felt... nice. It felt nice to be cared for. It was still such a new feeling. And it made him feel guilty and selfish for enjoying it at all, which his therapist had advised him to acknowledge, and reject. Arrush was *allowed* to be cared about, even if it was simply that some people would prefer that he be alive rather than dead.

It was hard to explain to some humans how big of a deal that was for him, and the other rescues from the Sewer.

Arrush took a breath, and took the feeling of not knowing what he should say, or do, or feel, and he sat that feeling aside. And then just let himself exist, sitting in warm water, comfortable, for a little while.

He listened to Bill excitedly tell his wife about the new condo layout they were building, and also how they were going to pitch a new energy solution at the next meeting. He watched Marcey's small smiles at her husband's exuberance, and knew from overheard conversations that she hadn't seen it for a while before they'd come here. He rapidly grabbed the purification brooch and tapped the water they were in when a line of corrosive drool dripped from his cracked muzzle into it.

He also made a mental note to ask someone later if it was funny to see Bill's reaction when Alanna came by and asked if she could join them. Bill had turned a bright red, like he was about to detonate like some of the small Akashic Sewer fleshlings did sometimes, and said something about it being impolite. Marcey had shaken her husband by the arm, and pointed out that he was already sharing a pool with Arrush, who was *also* naked, which had led to Bill giving a long list of reasons that weren't reasons as to why that was different.

Arrush didn't know what to make of it, but Marcey just kept her arms folded and a cross look on her face until her husband eventually gave in, and Alanna joined them. Alanna was as cheerful as she ever was; boisterous and enthusiastic, though she looked somewhat embarrassed as Marcey picked out a shampoo for her and started scrubbing at her hair. Arrush wondered what it felt like, to have someone else wash you. He made another mental note to ask Keeka later.

He was good at making mental notes. For all that he was growing, and becoming more confident, he still... didn't like talking, without consideration. He didn't know if that was unusual either.

The minutes passed as the water went through a few cycles of purification, as Bill eventually composed himself enough to engage with Alanna's questions about orange totem use with some kind of perpetual motion machine, and as Arrush felt his hide start to become wrinkled from his time sitting in the water. It was pleasant, and the heat was comfortable, and he didn't *really* know what he had to contribute, or what he was doing.

But most importantly, he just let himself be normal.

His normal.